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## Hebblethwaite & Henderson, eds., DIVINE ACTION: STUDIES INSPIRED BY THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY OF AUSTIN FARMER

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2. Interestingly, he is aware of this when he is criticizing Plantinga's use of Satan as an explanation of natural evil. He admits that this suggestion defeats the deductive problem of evil, but he insists that its success as an answer to the probabilistic argument from evil depends on how probable the theory of Satan is.

3. One particularly clear example of this is Martin's use of Bonjour's criticism of foundationalism as part of his rebuttal of the foundationalism underlying Plantinga's claim that beliefs about God may be properly basic. Unless Martin is willing to specify and defend a non-foundationalist epistemology as part of an overall belief-system which includes atheism, it is difficult to assess how successful his rebuttal of foundationalism is. Many of the other beliefs which Martin uses in his criticism of the arguments of theists are beliefs on which theists and atheists might well disagree, making all the more difficult the assessment of their strength as reasons for doubting or rejecting some theistic arguments.

4. The omission of Hasker's work is all the more surprising because Martin includes an extended discussion of Rowe's argument from evil, and many of Hasker's papers are in dialogue with Rowe. Perhaps the omission of process discussions of the problem of evil may be explained on the grounds that process theism understands God in a way different from Martin's definition, but he does depart from that definition himself in a brief discussion of a "finite God" theodicy and in a discussion of views of God's knowledge which deny that God knows the future actions of free agents.

5. He seems to consider faith a form of intellectual assent, either justified by the evidence (Aquinas) or going radically beyond or even against the evidence (Kierkegaard). He uses the phrase "belief in God" to refer to having faith in God and to believing that God exists, as though there were little or no difference between the two.

6. In his "Preface" Martin tells of the influence which childhood conversations with his atheistic step-grandfather had on his becoming an atheist.

7. Martin acknowledges this in one footnote (n. 8 on p. 484), but he does not draw from it the implications which I do in my review.

*Divine, Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, edited by **Brian Hebblethwaite** and **Edward Henderson**. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990. Pp. 281. Cloth.

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It is fitting that Austin Farrer's work should inspire philosophical theology. Austin Farrer (1904-1968), an Anglican priest and Oxford academic, was a philosophical theologian of a high order. The present volume is not a commentary on Farrer's work, but a collection of papers which variously employ Farrer's understanding of Divine agency as a point of departure in developing independent positions in the philosophy of God. Contributors discuss creation, the miraculous, double agency (God's action through human action), the place of narrative in understanding Divine activity, epistemic conditions for recognizing God's action, and the implications of our beliefs about God's

actions for our political and moral practices. There is also an essay on Farrer's spiritual life and his intellectual development. Hebblethwaite and Henderson provide an able introduction to the ten papers which follow and the collection of eight indexes. Farrer's books were rarely indexed and the inclusion of the indexes prepared by Diogenes Allen is valuable. Readers may find it useful to affix a copy of the relevant index to their books by Farrer. It is somewhat ironic that the current volume, *Divine Action*, should contain so many indexes for other books and not one for itself.

The first paper by Richard Harries, now the Anglican Bishop of Oxford, offers an overview of Farrer's religious life, drawing attention to the unity of his intellectual and spiritual pursuits, and his extraordinary capacity as a homilest. Farrer was a gifted poet and preacher, and his style of writing often enlivened and dramatized his technical philosophical works. The ending of his masterful *Finite and Infinite* is a case in point. Sadly, few of Farrer's sermons and poems are still in print. Perhaps one of the best collections of his sermons is *A Faith of Our Own* (1960) which contains an appreciative introduction by C. S. Lewis. I do not think it exaggerated to compare his sermons in terms of literary merit and religious illumination to the mature sermons of Cardinal John Henry Newman.

Owen Thomas' paper, "Recent Thought on Divine Agency," surveys contributions to the field since the publication of his valuable anthology *God's Activity in the World* (1983). Curiously, his assessment of the current scene differs radically from the one William Alston offers in his contribution, "How to Think About Divine Action." Compare Thomas: "Theologians continue to talk a great deal about God's activity in the world, and there continue to be only a very few who pause to consider some of the many problems involved in such talk" (p. 35) and Alston: "There seems to be a widespread impression in theological circles, and among some philosophers who concern themselves with such matters, that the idea of God acting 'in the world' is at best problematic, dubious, and puzzling, and, at worst, incoherent, unintelligible, or radically unacceptable" (p. 51). Judging by the survey Thomas provides and the entries in his earlier anthology, the truth seems closer to Alston. Thomas' essay, as with most of the contributions, presupposes familiarity with enough philosophy of religion to make it difficult for an introductory student but useful for those (graduate or undergraduate) who have already engaged the literature.

Alston's paper is a model of clarity and rigor. He defends the coherence of the belief that God acts in creation, preserving the world in existence and interacting with persons. To my mind, he successfully defeats the objections lodged by Langdon Gilkey and others that talk of Divine agency is unintelligible. Gilkey argues that the theistic depiction of God's action involves an equivocation with respect to our talk of human agency and it also relies on

a discredited understanding of nature and causation. Alston's conclusion, with its triumphal ring, seems to me to be well deserved. "I conclude that the equivocity bogey (or more generally, the unintelligibility bogey), like the causal determinism bogey, is no more than a paper bogey. As with all bogeys, the reasonable course is to stare them down and get on with our work" (p. 70).

In their introduction Hebblethwaite and Henderson offer some cautionary remarks about Alston's paper which seem oddly juxtaposed. They note that from Farrer's point of view Alston's defense of Divine intervention raises "The religious worry...over the implications of hidden *manipulation* by God in the natural story of people's lives" (emphasis theirs, p. 6). But if they bemoan a dangerous excessiveness on Alston's part when it comes to the scope of Divine agency, they also note that, from a Farrer-informed point of view, Alston has too narrow a notion of the scope of God's power. Farrer affirms "What Alston in his discussion of conceptual possibilities seems by implication to deny: that God can act in and through the free agency of human beings and that it is precisely in the free pursuit of the divine will that we are able most clearly to see God's action in the world" (p. 7). Interestingly enough, Alston's hesitancy to embrace an unqualified thesis that God acts through human activity is due to his concern with preserving human freedom and thus, I assume, with preserving the view that God is *not* manipulative in any conceptually or ethically repugnant sense. As it stands, however, Alston is able to give a large berth to Divine agency and human freedom (pp. 57-61) and readers interested in Alston's view of God-human convergence of action may want to review his "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit" (in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, edited by T. V. Morris. Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1988).

In "Divine Action: The Doctrinal Tradition" Eugene TeSelle juxtaposes Farrer's understanding of Divine agency with other alternatives, especially a Whiteheadian model. This is a valuable paper, though I fail to see that TeSelle has exposed any serious weakness in Farrer's view of God's action. TeSelle writes: "One can understand his (Farrer's) assertion that God is intelligent will. But this says more about how God *is* than how God *acts*. We can keep saying that God's acts are not like ours, and that God's will takes effect immediately. But this is mere assertion. Farrer has rejected the two models that have seemed more or less adequate to the theological tradition—the Aristotelian one of Pure Act which gives actuality to the finite process, and the Platonic World-Soul which influences by 'combining itself' with the finite process" (pp. 77-78). Farrer's treatment of the will in *Finite and Infinite* and *The Freedom of the Will* (the 1957 Gifford Lectures) is capable of improvement and development (as he himself insisted), but I do not share TeSelle's judgment. I see no reason to prefer the other alternatives to Farrer's, and

suggest that Alston's paper provides a useful resource enabling us to think of Farrer's proposal as a plausible (and not "mere") assertion.

David Burrell's "Divine Practical Knowing; How an Eternal God Acts in Time" is the shortest paper in the anthology, but the most ambitious. Burrell understands God as pure act, and articulates a subtle philosophy of Divine immanence and transcendence. In their introduction Hebblethwaite and Henderson encourage us to question whether Burrell's portrait of God would be better articulated in terms of "primordial temporality" (p. 10), rather than pure act, and it is indeed tempting to think of God as containing some kind of potency given Burrell's view of human freedom. Without being able to do justice to this debate here, I simply note that Burrell's paper provides an important account of Divine agency which should stimulate a close reading of Burrell's other published work where he develops further the metaphysics of God which is at stake.

The contributions by David Brown, Rodger Forsman, Michael McLain, and Thomas Tracy each take up the concept of double agency.

Brown's "God and Symbolic Action" provides an illuminating account of Divine activity in liturgical contexts. Brown, like Alston, is uncompromising when it comes to recognizing human freedom, yet he sees this as no barrier to thinking of God and human persons in proximate communion of action. He aims at giving a greater role to our unconscious life as an avenue for Divine agency than Farrer recognized. Forsman's "'Double Agency' and Identifying Reference to God" also focuses upon the interior, psychological character of God-human interaction.

In "Narrative Interpretation and the Problem of Double Agency" McLain endorses Alston's reply to Gilkey *et al.*, but unlike Alston, Brown and others, he is wary of accepting (at least, as he says, "uncritically") the Biblical narratives of God-human interaction. Some of his reservations here seem to me to be problematic, but raise issues too complex to treat fairly here. I will only cite one of the five principle reasons he offers.

"It may not be, as Hume argued, in principle impossible to be justified in believing that a 'wondrous' event has occurred, for example, that Sarah's child is due to the direct action of God, it is nevertheless difficult to justify such a claim. To do so we would need to rule out as possible a naturalistic explanation. But that would require that we have a complete account of Sarah's condition, as well as one of all the natural causes relevant to that kind of occurrence. It seems improbable that we could ever be in a position to meet these conditions" (pp. 158, 159).

I do not dispute that it may be difficult to justify the belief that a given event like Sarah's conceiving a child is owing to God's activity. Still, I do not think that justifying such a belief requires that we rule out as impossible all naturalistic explanations. Justifying the belief that naturalistic explanations are

less plausible than the supernatural one and that it is more reasonable to accept the supernatural one than to withhold belief will suffice. We do not need to go on to "rule out as possible a naturalistic explanation."

McLain ends his paper with an interesting discussion on the conceivability of God's revelation to us being non-verbal. The discussion and his proposed examples seem well taken and can be accepted while preserving the notion that revelation through Divine activity is still propositional. Obviously propositions can be expressed and properly communicated nonverbally. As an aside, I do not think the occurrence of Divine verbal revelation, that is revelation through auditions brought about by God, need weigh against McLain's and others concern that there be some "epistemic distance" between God and the world (p. 159). Someone may receive verbal revelation and yet the evidence that the auditions were from God may be meager and far from compelling. There are cases in religious literature which give us reason to think it is not unusual for there to be a level of uncertainty about auditions ostensibly from God. For a dramatic, fictional account of this, readers may find William Golding's novel *Pincher Martin* (1956) valuable. The protagonist has an array of visions and auditions, including some of which he is unsure whether they originate in God's activity or are mere hallucinations.

Thomas Tracy's "Narrative Theology and the Acts of God" is a comprehensive and, I think, well conceived defense of a theistic account of God's action in our lives. Tracy gives ample room to the affective dimension of God's integral role in human life. Diogenes Allen's "Faith and the Recognition of God's Activity" develops Farrer's notion of the essential role of faith in grasping God's interaction with us. Allen does this with skill and shows that Farrer's strategy by no means leads one to an anti-intellectual nightmare.

The final essay, "Divine Action and Human Liberation" by Jeffrey Eaton, highlights the crucial role of presuming God to be an agent in a liberation theology. The essay strikes a reasonable, refreshing course as it underscores the constructive essential role of metaphysics for those in the liberation movement who give pride of place to orthopraxis. Along these lines, I am not sure we need to eschew altogether the *a priori* high role in our metaphysics of God. Eaton notes that "Farrer sought in his theology of will to be rid of every form of *apriorism*, philosophical and theological" (p. 219). It seems to me that the Anselmian values and excellence (as in T. V. Morris' work, for example), can provide more of an asset than a hindrance for one's theology of suffering and political action.

Regrettably, the volume contains several printing errors. On page 58, 5 lines down, "that" should be substituted for "than." On page 111, 7 lines up, "one" should be substituted for "on," and on page 198, the footnote should read "1982" instead of "1882."